

WHO'S AFRAID OF NAMFREL?

We, the members of the business community, are dismayed and gravely concerned at the Commission on Elections' denial of the joint petition of the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel) and CBCP-NASSA for accreditation as citizens' arm in the May 10 elections.

This development is very alarming, given the crucial nature of these polls to a peaceful transfer of political power and its positive effects on the business and investment climate. The May 10 elections will be the first automated polls in the country's history. But the capabilities of the new system are untested, and the people are worried about the possibility of wholesale cheating, logistical failures, and unexpected power interruptions.

The case for vigilance and the importance of public credibility of election results cannot be overstated.

Since 1984, Namfrel has distinguished itself as a non-partisan, ecumenical organization of volunteers committed to the sanctity of the ballot. Through more than 25 national and local elections, Namfrel volunteers watched over voting, counting, and canvassing. Their quick counts delivered timely results to the people, giving credibility to the democratic process. Namfrel has even become a model and an invited participant or adviser for election monitoring in over 32 countries.

But last week, the Comelec, under Chairman Jose A. R. Melo, unanimously decided to deny Namfrel, in partnership with the CBCP-NASSA, accreditation for the May 10 elections. This means that Namfrel and CBCP-NASSA will not be entitled to their own copy of the election returns normally used for a parallel count, which they need to perform an independent audit of poll results.

The Comelec cited the alleged partisanship of some of Namfrel's key officers as the reason for the denial. But through all the past administrations, Namfrel has always been comprised of citizens of various political persuasions, and yet the organization itself has consistently remained non-partisan. Moreover, Namfrel, being ecumenical, provides non-Catholics a venue for participating in the safeguarding of their votes.

While the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) has already been accredited, the Comelec has accredited more than one citizens' arm in the past and Namfrel-CBCP-NASSA more than deserve that accreditation because of their established reputations for independence, even from the Comelec.

The Comelec needs Namfrel to help assure the public that there will be no failure of elections. Denying the Namfrel petition simply raises doubts about transparency, whether the Comelec's much-vaunted Automated Election System can stand close scrutiny.

We urge the Comelec to reconsider its decision, but we also encourage and support Namfrel to stand fast in its commitment to free, clean, and fair elections, with or without Comelec accreditation.

BISHOPS-BUSINESSMEN'S CONFERENCE FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (BBC)
FINANCIAL EXECUTIVES INSTITUTE OF THE PHILIPPINES (FINEX)
MAKATI BUSINESS CLUB (MBC)
MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION OF THE PHILIPPINES (MAP)
PHILIPPINE INSTITUTE OF CERTIFIED PUBLIC ACCOUNTANTS (PICPA)

A